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Using principles of trust to engage support with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. A Practice Report

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Abstract

Stemming from a review of higher education in Australia, there has been renewed emphasis on increasing the participation rates of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (LSES) in tertiary study. While Student Services' departments are designed to build the personal resources of students aiding in their retention and subsequent success in higher education, LSES students may have complex social, economic, and cultural factors that may affect the institution's capacity to support them effectively. Selected findings will be shared from a grounded theory doctoral study that has generated a model for how to engage students from LSES in non-academic support services throughout their tertiary studies. The research showed that LSES students use principles of trust to navigate the tertiary environment and the students' network is key to their success. Discussion focussed on how to apply these principles in practice and implications for service delivery.

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Introduction

In the past few years, Australian higher education has been impacted by a widening participation strategy driven by the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda. Following a review of Australian higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), there has been much emphasis on increasing the participation rates of people from LSES backgrounds to grow Australia's human capital and broaden the reach of education to educationally disadvantaged groups (of whom LSES is just one). The International Association of Universities (IAU) (2012) has publicly stated that "access without a reasonable chance of success is an empty promise" (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington, & Clarke, 2012, p. 1) which highlights the need for universities to consider the support needs of LSES students, not only their entry into the system.

While Student Services' departments are designed to build the personal resources of students aiding in their retention and subsequent success in higher education, LSES students have complex social, economic, and cultural factors that may affect services' capacity to support them effectively (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Using Bourdieu's (1979) definition, LSES students are likely to have poor social and cultural capital that tends to limit their capacity and willingness to seek help for matters that may affect their retention and progression in higher education (Coleman, 1988). It can be argued that personal adjustment and social integration into university life are just as important as academic factors in enabling a student to persist and succeed in higher education (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Nelson et al., 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2005). The role Student Services play in supporting students is significant and complements the

access and transition programs, as well as the learning and teaching initiatives that are currently being heavily explored (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012; Kift et al., 2010). As stated by Elliott and den Hollander (2010), "if we have been successful in raising application and participation rates from equity target groups, we rightly should be interested in their subsequent success" (p. 27). A leading international researcher into retention puts it quite simply that "access without support is not opportunity" (Tinto, 2007, p. 1), highlighting that entry into university without adequate support structures in place to support students can be counterproductive.

The increasing diversity of students in higher education is not unique to Australia, as research in the US, the UK and Europe has also demonstrated the importance of a diverse student population (Crosier, Purser, & Smidt, 2007; El-Khawas, 1996; Yorke & Thomas, 2003). These studies are each assessing the value and contribution of and by Student Services departments in relation to the participation and success of students from LSES backgrounds. For example, a UK research study surveyed how Student Services can support the retention of diverse student populations (Thomas, Quinn, Slack, & Casey, 2003a). Additionally, known as the Bologna Process, higher education in Europe (in cooperation with education ministries from numerous countries) undertook a sweeping review of higher education standards and quality assurance measures (Crosier et al., 2007). European research has demonstrated since the implementation of the Bologna reforms that Student Services are still not sufficiently developed to adapt to the growing diversity of the student body but knowingly make a valuable contribution to individual students (Crosier et al., 2007). While research so far has not yielded a clear

link between the uptake of student support services and retention or success rates, it has recognised the importance of Student Services departments.

In Australia, the most recent broad scale analysis of student support services was held over 20 years ago. An analysis of 159 organisational units in 34 higher education institutions was conducted to identify a performance evaluation framework for student support services in order to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness (Department of Employment, 1993). It identified that “few qualitative and quantitative indicators have been designed to enhance and promote quality service provision specific to the unique range of services available to Australian students” (p. 2) (Department of Employment, 1993). The research concluded with a suite of key performance indicators that could evaluate the effectiveness of Student Services on the basis of awareness and access to services, user satisfaction, student demand, usage patterns, flexibility and responsiveness, and innovation (p. 62). Subsequently, a DEET report released in 1994 announced a number of recommendations for Student Services’ departments as well as key performance indicators (KPIs) to ensure effective service delivery (Department of Employment, 1994). Since that time, there has been no large scale determination of student support services in higher education in Australia nor has the capacity of Student Services to target LSES students and achieve positive outcomes been assessed. This study aimed to determine what theoretical model can be developed that will inform the development of student support services in Australia to effectively respond to the non-academic needs of LSES students.

Overview of methodology

A qualitative study was undertaken using grounded theory methodology (GTM). GTM is “a logically consistent set of data collection and analytic procedures aimed to develop theory” (Charmaz, 2004, p. 27). In light of the debate regarding the evolution of GTM since its arrival in Glaser and Strauss’ (2011) early work, this research aligned its strategy with that of Charmaz’s (2006) given its basis in the principles of constructivism. It assumes multiple realities, the data reflect the participant’s and the researcher’s constructions, and the researcher enters and is affected by the participant’s world leading to an interpretivist portrayal of the situation (Gale & Tranter, 2011).

This study involved semi-structured interviews with 17 LSES mature-aged students who were studying on campus as well as 3 staff from a regional university. Questions were asked in relation to the student experience and student retention, needs in relation to student support, knowledge and awareness of current support initiatives, potential gaps in service delivery, and barriers to accessing services. A distinguishing characteristic of GTM is that the collection of data and the analysis occur simultaneously via a process of line-by-line and focused coding of transcribed interviews. Following 20 interviews, no new ideas or information were discovered after commonalities and patterns were apparent in all participants, a process known as saturation. At this point, three focus groups were held to check the apparent themes that had emerged and their various properties. Final theorising culminated from developing explanations between the data where concepts were connected to form an explanatory theoretical framework.

Selected findings

Not surprisingly, students expressed a desire for a common suite of supports that is consistent with that found in prior research (Bolam & Dodgson, 2003), most noticeably, financial support, childcare, support for disability, and balancing life with study. Again not surprisingly, students had a very low understanding and awareness of existing support services and if they did, their likelihood of accessing or utilising these services was severely diminished for a variety of reasons. Awareness of services has already been identified as a success factor in prior research (Department of Employment, 1994; Thomas et al., 2003a; Thomas, Quinn, Slack, & Casey, 2003b). However, mere awareness does not equate necessarily with utilisation of those services. It was important to explore the variables that increased the likelihood of students accessing services.

A thematic trend was that students were more likely to uptake services or access Student Services if a person in their personal network encouraged them to do so, for instance a lecturer, tutor, administration officer, peer, or family member. It was explored as to why students are more likely to seek out support if they were referred by others and six principles were identified. The referral source had to demonstrate (1) availability ("they're there"), (2) responsiveness ("there when I need them"), (3) a pre-existing relationship ("I already know them"), (4) experience ("they understand where I am coming from"), (5) willingness to help ("they want to help me"), and (6) credibility ("they know what they are doing"). These form the basis of a concept known as 'trust'. Students are more likely to access support services if someone in their personal network that they trust advises or

encourages them to do so. It is not common for students to have direct relationships with Student Services staff in their ordinary interactions with their studies while lecturers, tutors and peers are familiar connections.

The principles of trust identified in this study are consistent with the "trust equation" which claims business relationships are only successful when trustworthiness is established from four key variables – credibility, reliability, intimacy and self-orientation (Green, 2005; Maister, Green, & Galford, 2000). Whilst noting the differentiation between a sales or leadership relationship and student success, the principles of trust and building successful relationships are consistent. To be successful in higher education, it is said that students must have social capital (Bourdieu, 1979; Coleman, 1988; Grenfell, 2008), defined recently as the "social relationships between individuals, institutions and communities" and that trust is a key link between these (Fuller, 2013, p. 2). Moreso, "social capital increases with increased community engagement via the development of trusting and reciprocal relationships" (p. 13).

The findings thereby suggest that social capital which enhances a student's success is increased by the formation of a network of support established on trust. The implications for Student Services' departments is that they need to connect into a student's network of support and if there is not a direct relationship of trust already established then efforts must be applied to building integrity with known entities within the networks. For Student Services, this equates to educating key stakeholders across the institution about services and forming referral pathways: a collaborative institutional approach to student support. Student Services need to

connect with people who are likely to be in the students' personal network. This approach creates multiple entry points into the Service and into supports, not relying on a direct relationship, which is unlikely to exist, with the student in the first instance. These results are consistent with key advice provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching project "Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education" (Devlin et al., 2012). Advice for teachers and institutional leaders includes knowing your students, being available and approachable, promote engagement and encourage help-seeking.

This research provides empirical evidence as to how non-academic student support services can adequately support LSES students. It is anticipated that this theoretical framework will inform planning and delivery of services across the sector. The principles identified to date are currently being trialled at a regional tertiary institution.

Conference discussion

Preliminary findings of this research were presented in July at the 2014 International First Year in Higher Education Conference in Darwin, Australia. Participants at the session were asked to consider how the reported experiences of students were consistent with their experience in working with students, what research this theory confirmed or contradicted, and what the practical implications were of this approach to supporting LSES students. Participants suggested the findings resonated with their understanding of students' navigating the institutional environment and seeking help. They provided particular examples of students residing in on-campus accommodation and those accessing

smaller campuses. Of note was a query about the study's validity – time restrictions for the presentation did not allow for a detailed discussion about the methodology or academic rigor of the study. Participants were informed that the research was conducted from a constructivist paradigm and that no one truth or reality was seen to exist, therefore an assessment of validity would be inappropriate. This qualitative study was instead assessed against the principles of credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness to measure its rigor, trustworthiness measures consistent with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The research that was raised for consideration of providing an alternative interpretation was that of learned dependency theory and whether those students who return to the original source of help are just demonstrating a form of dependence rather than using a trusting relationship. This research was noted and will be considered further. However, preliminary thinking identifies that the students interviewed in the study did not represent as high users of any particular support. They were quite resistant in fact, which contradicts any dependency issues.

Participants presented ideas for implications in practice and noted that the use of peer leaders or student clubs and societies were key to connecting with a student's network. One representative from a university suggested the idea of removing physical reception counters to mitigate any perceived barrier between the Service and the student and this is currently being trialled with some success at their institution. The ongoing discussion at the conference with participants was constructive and thought provoking. In conclusion, participants provided overwhelming support for the theory.

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